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ABSTRACT*: When life skills achievement among adolescent students shows a proportion of 51:49 respectively on the good and poor achievement levels, especially from a generic school setting, a high need for guidance also is evident in critical areas of development, where the proportion of high and low need is 58:42 respectively. Most of these needs are either unnoticed or unmet. This paper describes a pioneering study that examines both these aspects in a higher secondary school sample where no specific programmes are offered in life skills formally or informally as well as systems for professional guidance are yet not functional. Exploratory method has been adopted for the current study in which one thousand four hundred and twenty five higher secondary school students participated in a questionnaire survey measuring their life skills achievement and guidance needs. Life skills follow the pattern suggested by WHO and falls majorly into three categories: Social, Cognitive and Emotional coping skills. Guidance needs were assessed in 5 areas; Physical, Psychological, Social, Educational and Vocational. Findings of the survey are discoursed in focus group discussions of students from the same population and higher secondary teachers to get more clarity on the issues as they exist and also to think further on the significance of professional involvement and inclusive programmes in the schooling process. Strategies to be adopted in the setting are suggested based on a school social work purview with suggestive inputs for policies and practices. Study also opens up room for further detailed research on the various factors of life skill achievement and guidance need areas so as to plan ahead for life skill based schooling practices ensuring access to professional guidance. School social work programme can be constituted to comprehensively handle both these facets at school level.*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical period during which remarkable physical and psychological, changes take place. These rapid changes coupled with the absence of authentic information to know, understand and value them, cause anxiety among adolescents who may be pushed into courses of actions without having a chance to think fully of consequences. This becomes harder and further complicated for the adolescents when there are no supporting services available in the society to meet these challenges in personal life. School setting is very important for adolescents in picking the necessary life skills, where planned interventions are now inclusive in many countries.

Majority schools in Kerala, especially the ones which follow the state syllabus, does not offer any planned inputs or interventions in the area of life skills, neither as part of curriculum nor as an additional programme. The same as in the case of life skills is happening with professional guidance offered to the student folk. In many other countries life skill based education and systematic guidance programmes are inclusive in various forms within the school setting. With regard to life skills, many countries have adapted it as part of the curriculum, developing modules and specific activities. In the area of guidance services, some schools have school social work setting, some appoint trained counselors, while some others train teachers to handle the issues by themselves. But in Kerala, where educational standards are relatively high, the focus in the areas of life skills and guidance is really poor.

Hence it is imperative to have a clear and systematic understanding about the current situation of the adolescent student population in the state for framing policies or planning programmes. The current study is designed to evaluate these aspects as it focuses the achievement level in life skill areas and the guidance needs of the adolescent students in the state. It is further envisaged to analyse the differences among different segments of the population that overlooks the issues in a planning point of view.

2. The problem

More and more stories are coming up these days of youngsters fatally overwhelmed of drugs and substance abuse, depression, behaviour risks, suicides, immoral acts, crimes, and violence. Although it's hard to admit, both children and youth are facing a social crisis. The prevalent adolescent issues in the state point towards a high need for professional guidance services concerning a healthy development. The situation is further challenging when the education sector does not incorporate the life skills development aspects into the schooling process or come up with a dependable guidance system. Even when young people pick up generic life skills from their environment and experience, there is an uncertainty on its appropriateness as the guidance needs expressed by this population is rated very high in critical development areas.

Unless and otherwise the life skills and guidance needs of adolescent students are systematically assessed and evaluated, distinctly reaching out to the nature of association within these two key elements, the planning for inclusive life skill based education would be incomplete.

3. Definition of Key terms

A. Life skills

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO).

Common elements of life skills which were found across all cultures and settings, in the developed and the developing countries, are self awareness, empathy, interpersonal relationship skill, effective communication, decision making, problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, coping with stress and coping with emotions.

Components of Life skills:

Based on research and theories of human development, the research team of Adolescent Health and Development Unit (Division of Health Promotion and Protection, Pan American Health Organization) on life skills has identified three key basic categories of life skills, which complement and reinforce each other:

i. *Social or interpersonal skills,* including communication, negotiation/ refusal skills, assertiveness, cooperation, empathy.

ii. *Cognitive skills,* including problem solving, understanding consequences, decision making, critical thinking, self-evaluation.

iii. *Emotional coping skills,* including managing stress, managing feelings, self-management, and self-monitoring.

B. Guidance Needs

Guidance needs refers to the necessity level of adolescent students for an authentic external support to help them directed towards informed decisions in areas that have direct impact in their development.

Components of guidance needs:

The components of Guidance Needs Inventory (National Psychological Corporation, Agra, India) developed by Dr. Grewal has been adapted for the current research and they are:

i. *Physical Needs:* Satisfactions that can be possibly b brought about by the school or guidance personnel by providing guidance to the students in physical activities such as sports, games, health etc.

ii. *Social Needs:* This refers to the availability of congenial social environment of school consisting of peers and companions, where they meet and work with each other and experience a kind of social achievement.

iii. *Psychological Needs:* This refers to those personal wants that are related with an individual's mental or emotional satisfactions that are provided by the school or guidance personnel.

iv. *Educational Needs:* This refers to the preparation of an individual for living in a complex world consisting of formal institutions which prepare an individual student for life by bringing about an all round development of his personality. The various school personnel, mostly teachers and guidance personnel - provide assistance to individual students in this regard.

v. *Vocational Needs:* This means the need to know about and prepare for the world of work and find a place for oneself in society with a view of achieving self-fulfillment.

C. Adolescents

Adolescents in this study refer to people in the age group of 16 to 19 years (including both age), which is broadly considered as late adolescence. Special reference inclines to those are studying in the 11th and 12th standards of state syllabus higher secondary schools in Kerala.

4. Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual and theoretical explanation of the key elements validating the rationale of the study is done in detail. It depicts the development stages in childhood and adolescence along with the process of skill development and also looks into the theoretical foundations of life skills approach, analysing seven theories: social learning, problem behavior, social influence, cognitive problem solving, multiple intelligences, risk and resilience and constructivist psychology theories. As an interdisciplinary approach, Hurrelman's socialization – theoretical approach also is analysed for a better understanding of the relationships between personality and social structure. Finally, perspective of life skills established through research studies and intervention experiences also is given, in which the concept of social, cognitive and emotional coping skills are explicated.

5. Literature Review

Review of empirical literature focuses on factors related to the major themes of the current study as covered in specific studies, reports and intervention programmes, highlighting the common and contemporary trends in the sector. Areas of school social work, school counselling and guidance and life skill education are explicitly covered. It also comes up with the research findings in life skills training program contributing to positive educational outcomes and health education. Finally, this section provides a review into the current Kerala scenario keeping in view the issues and needs of the adolescent population and the progression and challenges of life skill education.

6. Objectives of the Study

Overall objective: The present study aims to assess the level of life skills achievement and guidance needs of adolescent students in the state of Kerala. The study also evaluates the association between life skill achievement and guidance needs of adolescent students.

Specific objectives:

1. To assess the level of self perception of life skills achievement of adolescent students based on different standard components of life skills.
2. To assess the level of guidance needs of adolescent students based on different standard components of guidance needs.
3. To study the association between life skill achievement and guidance needs of adolescent students.

7. Research Hypotheses

1. Adolescent students of Kerala have good life skill achievement in social, cognitive and emotional coping areas thus holding the overall life skill achievement also good.
2. Adolescent students of Kerala have high guidance needs in physical, psychological, social, educational and vocational areas thus making the overall guidance needs also high.

3. Guidance need of adolescent students is inversely related to their achievement in life skills.

8. Methodology

The current study is exploratory in nature as there is no doctoral level or other studies on the theme available. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods including a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions and thus the approach is a mixed one. This approach of using multiple methodologies permitted triangulation of the data to improve the validity of the findings and also enabled greater inferences from the results.

9. Universe of the study

The universe of the current study is the adolescent students in the state of Kerala falling in the age group of 16 to 19 years and following their higher secondary education.

10. Population

The population of the current study include 3,63,180 students studying in the entire 1907 higher secondary schools in Kerala.

11. Sampling

Considering the size of the population and the geographical divergences, the researcher decided to move with multi-stage sampling. As the first stage, one school from each district has been selected. For this, one school has been spotted from the district-wise list of higher secondary schools using lottery method of simple random sampling. Preferring one school from each district also ensured the representation from all areas of the state. This criterion could also cover the geographic segmentation of the population in the state.

Proceeding to the second stage, fixed interval random sampling technique was applied to select the students from these schools. The attendance register was used as sample frame. Thus the total number of sample respondents from these schools came within the range of 97 – 106, covering the available sub-segments, comprising a total number of 1425 samples from the selected schools from 14 districts.

In some districts, one other school had to approach because the number of available students being less due to academic schedules like study leaves. Also there was a little throttling in getting enough plus two students as some of the schools had given them time for study leave. Thus following multistage sampling keeping a clear inclusion - exclusion criteria, 1425 adolescent students in the age group of 16-19, studying in the higher secondary schools of Kerala following the state syllabus were selected as the study group.

12. Progression of the Study

The study progressed in the following manner. When the study was initiated, there was hardly any data to rely upon for studying the life skill aspects of the adolescent student population or their guidance needs. As an emerging field, there were only few experts researcher could find for initiating research discussions and they were from multi disciplinary backgrounds majorly social work, psychology, and sociology. From secondary research and expert discussions it was substantiated that there were no tools developed for assessing the life skill achievement. Subsequently, the researcher developed himself a tool for assessing the life skill achievement of the population adopting the standard components of Life skills defined by the Adolescent Health and Development Unit, Pan American Health Organization, Washington DC (2001). Eventually a tool for assessing the guidance needs of the student population has been tracked

which is developed in India, the Guidance Needs Inventory. This has been adopted as part of the survey questionnaire.

The instrument was reviewed and approved by panel of experts from different disciplines like pedagogy, psychology and social work. Also the linguistic appropriateness of the Malayalam questions in questionnaire has been reviewed by a Malayalam expert. To verify the appropriateness of this tool, the researcher tested it in a sample of 40 students. The researcher found these tools of data collection well adapted and sufficiently appropriate to elicit the required data considering some modifications in the wording of some of the questions on the basis of the responses. Those modifications were thus incorporated in the final questionnaire.

The researcher then personally approached the authorities of each selected schools in 14 districts to get formal sanctions to carry out the data collection. A written letter of request seeking permission to conduct research among the students, together with a sample questionnaire and the consent form were sent to get the approval from the Principal of these schools. The researcher collected these consent letters duly filled in and signed by the school authorities before the process of data collection.

The instrument for data collection (questionnaire) was administered in groups among the selected sample from one school at a time. They were supplied with the booklet with answer keys of the 3 sets followed by proper oral instructions. Though there were no time limits, they were asked to write down as fast as they can and provide with their honest, genuine and first response to each item. Every item was to be answered by every subject. After the subjects finished their responses, the booklets were collected back in which the responses are marked.

The analysis of survey results (quantitative data) was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). A master chart in SPSS format in order with the variable indicators of each question with its weightage options has been prepared for entering the collected data. The answered questionnaire sheets were coded district wise. Then the researcher himself entered the collected data from entire 1425 samples into the SPSS master chart. The data were then analyzed using SPSS. “Percentages Analysis”, “Pearson’s correlation test”, “t-test for equality of means”, One way ANOVA and Chi-squire test are the statistical devices applied in the process of data analysis. They are used for establishing the relationships and general trends existing among the variables and making the comparisons between sub groups.

For the qualitative part of the data, focus group discussions were conducted among adolescent students and teachers of higher secondary schools to confirm the results of the quantitative study and to make the results more reliable. This also was used to get their perception on the reasons for the obtained survey results. Total 3 FGDs were conducted, where one of them from among students and the other two among teachers. It was decided that each group should include more than 10 members for consistency in opinions and ideas of members of the group. The first hand information from these discussions, like major discussion points, opinions and inferences are conceived as the qualitative data.

The results derived from the statistical treatment of the data were interpreted and compared with available theories and other established findings of the research studies. From these interpretations, the researcher traced the general trends and association which has helped them in the process of accepting and rejecting the hypotheses to come up with findings and conclusions.

13. Findings

51% of the sample population is found to be good in overall life skill achievement, where as 51% is good in social skills, 55% good in cognitive skills and 59% good in emotional coping skills.

Majority (58%) of the sample population is found to be with 'high' guidance needs, where physical guidance need is marked by 58%, social guidance need 62%, psychological guidance needs 54%, educational guidance needs 57% and vocational guidance needs 60%.

Perception of overall life skill achievement is found significantly more among girls. This result is rationalized in the FGDs with the background of parental education, enhanced motivation towards education and occupation, the changing social settings where girls have equal space with boys etc.

No significant difference exists in the perception of overall life skill achievements of adolescent students based on their regions. Also no significant difference exist in the perceptions of overall life skill achievements of adolescent studying in Government, Private and Government Aided schools.

Perception of overall life skill achievement is found more among plus one students. There exists a significant difference in the perceptions of overall life skill achievement of adolescent students based on their academic year of study – plus one and plus two. But there are no significant differences by year of study in any of the sub components - social skills, cognitive skills and emotional coping skills. The factors pointed out then were the advantages of Sarva Siksha Abhyan and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) where the plus one students were being part of and must have received contributory inputs. Also it was pointed out that the plus two students might have looked through the questionnaire little more seriously and in a more matured way than the plus one students.

The overall life skill achievement is found high among students in commerce discipline, followed by humanities students and it is found comparatively less in students of science discipline. There exists a significant difference in the perceptions of overall life skill achievement of adolescent students belonging to Science, Commerce and Arts disciplines. Commerce students are more prone to have good life skills than the other two on the ground of dealing with more human interactions and dealings. Comparing to the academic exercises, commerce students are more into realistic work from the initial year of higher secondary education. Humanities and Science students even take more time to reach their occupational and work related exercises.

There exists no significant difference in the guidance needs of higher secondary school students in Kerala based on their gender. But guidance needs is more among students from urban region and the lowest needs were expressed by students from tribal region. There exists a significant difference in the perception of guidance needs of adolescent students coming from urban, semi-urban, rural, coastal and tribal regions. Students from tribal region are found more capable of managing themselves and even engaged in activities supporting the family. Urban students are likely to be more dependants and engaged more in academic exercises or soft skills. One has a more realistic life with experience with all the hardness of it while the other has got a limited world as well as real life experiences. This has been also viewed in access to services, where students from tribal region have limited access to services and to make it happen they have to strive a lot. On the other hand, in urban region there is everything available in immediate reach.

Guidance needs is found comparatively high among students from Government schools, followed by Government aided schools and perceptions of guidance needs is low among students from private schools. There exists a significant difference in the perceptions of guidance needs of adolescent studying in Government, Private and Government Aided schools. This is observed as the result of the extra efforts taken by the management of the private schools in getting additional inputs which are contributing to student development.

Perception of guidance needs is comparatively high among plus two students. There exists a significant difference in the perceptions of overall guidance needs of adolescent students based on their academic year of study. This supports the previous observation that the plus two students have approached the questionnaire more seriously. They are about to move into another episode of their academic life opting their career choices and they are expecting more faces of life where they need to take decisions for them and move on.

There exists no significant difference in the perceptions of guidance needs of adolescent students belonging to Science, Commerce and Arts disciplines.

Finally, a highly significant relationship is observed between life skills and guidance needs. Among those who have poor life skills, significantly high proportion (67%) is seen with high guidance needs requirement. Out of the students with good life skills 51% shows low guidance needs requirement.

From these trends in the results, it becomes evident that the two key elements of the current study – life skill achievement and guidance needs, are inversely associated. Thus the three hypotheses of the study have been validated, the life skill achievement being good for the majority, guidance needs is high for the majority and also the life skill achievement of adolescent students is inversely related to their guidance needs.

14. Theoretical Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Programmes

The last chapter examines the current study for its relevant theoretical implications. The observed results in life skill achievement of adolescent students, within a generic school setting where they hardly receive any planned inputs in the area of life skills, support the social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1977). Children learn to behave through observation and social interaction, rather than just through verbal instruction. Similarly, children should be taught skills through a process of instruction, rehearsal, and feedback, rather than just instruction.

The study substantiates the view of Hurrelman (1990), that personal coping strategies cannot succeed without an effective social support from relevant others. For successful personality and social development, it is important that the society has a supporting social and political structure. It also validates the view of ESCAP (UN) that skills acquisition alone is not enough for adolescents. It needs to be combined with informational content addressing the social and developmental tasks relevant to this stage in life.

The study thus puts forward recommendations for both policy and programmes integrating the components of life skills as internal inputs and school social work focusing counselling and guidance as external support towards developing healthy generations. The major ones are given below:

Policy Recommendations

1. Life skill based education should be inclusive in the curriculum exerted with practicability methods. Deliberate efforts should be taken by the Education department to impart this programme with structured modules and lesson plans.

2. Teachers should be provided with basic knowledge and skills as part of their teachers training curriculum to impart life skill education to the adolescents. Also, special training on the life skill modules and lessons shall be provided.

3. It is also recommended to impart the basic counselling skills in the teachers training curriculum as they are the first point persons whom the adolescent students can access. It will enable them to deal with adolescents having high risk behavior thus having an effect of early identification and intervention.

4. Components of life skill based programmes implemented by various government departments (Social Welfare, Health, Education, Youth Affairs etc.) which focus school going children and adolescents shall be integrated and need to be coordinated by a single authority, preferably Department of Education, for a single but effective programme to avoid the scattering of components with different messages.

5. As the issues attached to the adolescent development may still evoke, and being seen that approaching teachers with confidential issues is found less preferred by students, especially in physical and psychological areas, there should be proper systems attached to schools to provide them with proper guidance from time to time.

Programme Recommendations

1. There are several life skills delivery mechanisms suggested for the school setting of Kerala based on the study outputs, and examining various models, like:

    a. Stand-alone life skills curriculum (Life Competencies Programme)

    b. Life Skills Curriculum integrated into an existing curriculum

    c. Extracurricular activities

    d. Blended programming (Adolescent Education Programme)

2. A comprehensive programme covering the three areas of life skills – social, cognitive and emotional coping skills, with equal significance and coverage shall be apprehended.

3. The modules and sessions shall be developed keeping in mind the different segments of the adolescent students as also based on their vulnerabilities. This shall be customised for different groups at the point of delivery based on needs and characteristics.

4. School guidance, need to be a team effort where trained teachers can contribute to educational, vocational, and social areas and at the same time, professional involvement is required in physical and psychological areas. This can be addressed with the systems in school social work setting, having a trained counselor in place. Current cluster level approach is not advised as it does not ensure accessibility. This can be decided at the school level with parental involvement and practiced locally as well.

15. Chapterisation

Chapter – I **Introduction**
The first chapter details the background and context of the problem

Chapter – II **Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Analysis**
The conceptual and theoretical explanation of the key elements validating the rationale of the study is done in the second chapter

Chapter – III **Review of Literature**
The third chapter reviews the empirical literature focusing the major themes of the current study as covered in specific studies, reports and intervention programmes

Chapter – IV **Research Methodology**
The fourth chapter details the approach, methodology and the organisation of the research process

Chapter – V **Data Analysis**
The fifth chapter analyses the primary data collected through the questionnaire survey and comes up with results thus forming the quantitative part of the study

Chapter – VI **Inferences from Focus Group Discussions**
The sixth chapter looks into the focus group discussions for the observations and reflections based on the survey results thus adding up the qualitative part of the study

Chapter – VII **Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion**
The seventh chapter presents the findings, connecting the results and inferences of the quantitative and qualitative information, followed by theoretical implications, policy and programme recommendations and then leading to the conclusion